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ABSTRACT

Constructing a family history can be significant in helping persons understand and appreciate the root system that supports and sustains them. Oral history can be a valuable resource in family research as Alex Haley demonstrated in writing "Roots." The major difficulty of using oral tradition in tracing a family history is that family members with crucial information may have died. Also, senility may be a difficulty, although older persons who have a bare grasp of reality may still remember events from their youth quite well. Using verse forms to write a family history may allow the preservation of words and language that are themselves part of the history and may keep the history from being a sterile recording of events. A chart indicating males and females, marriages and children, and deaths and divorces is also a valuable tool in developing a family history. Creating a family study is beneficial in family therapy since people are shaped by the way families develop and function. (TJ)

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TREES AND ROOTS

Presented at the Mid West Popular
Culture Association
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by

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My grandmother said that a lady would never wear an anklet or a red petticoat or jingle keys or smoke a cigarette on the street. You're maybe now saying to yourself, "What is she talking about? I thought this was "Trees and Roots" -- maybe something about horticulture. But I don't want to know what her grandmother said." My grandmother's statement is many things -- it is a piece of my family history, oral history as it were; it is a portion of my family's pool of knowledge, our ethnomethodology; it is a particular piece of the pattern for the socialization of women in my family. It is of just such pieces as this that family history is constructed. Own family research is what I would like to talk about today.

We've all witnessed the massive national response to Mr. Haley's Roots, first to the book and then to the televised series. Many black people have responded to Roots with an emotional outpouring that might on the surface seem inappropriate. There are good reasons for this. Until Mr. Haley published his book, many black people thought they had no history at all beyond that given in the American History texts. For some of us the last brush with that was back in the eleventh grade. Mr. Haley has done many things in bringing us Roots, but for me the most significant was in legitimizing oral history. His research proved that oral history is a reliable vehicle for the accurate transmition of history, customs and values across generations.

Oral history is something that all families have. It is not peculiar just to black families. All of use here are probably descended from immigrant groups, unless your ancestors were here to meet the boats. All of our ancestors had a variety of experiences which they no doubt told their children and grandchildren, etc. Some of these people kept diaries and journals and

wrote letters that people saved. Some of these people wrote books about their experiences that people outside the family could read. They probably all joined churches, paid taxes, held mortgages, bought and sold property and had these events duly recorded. When they died, their dates were recorded in church records, family bibles and on tombstones. Traditional family research is dependent on these sources.

During the earliest periods in the United States, these opportunities did not exist for the largest number of black people. Slaves were prevented by law from acquiring literacy. Some did learn to read and write but this was illegal and punishable by harsh means if their owners found out. How then did black people transmit vital information to their descendants? They told their children the things they thought were important and this information was stored in well developed memories.

In Africa this means of transmitting history from generation to generation, of storing in human memory important facts was well established in custom and practice. In fact it was the very center of African culture. In the period during which Africans and their descendants were enslaved, these traditions were very strong, sanctified as they were by centuries of practice and largely untouched by European influences that we see later in the European occupation of Africa during the colonial period. Our view of African history and culture has been so colored by hostile observers that doubt has been cast particularly on the ability of oral history to transmit accurately.

Much of the hostility of historians toward history is summed up by a statement made by Robert H. Lowie in an article entitled "Oral Traditions and History."

> I cannot attach to oral tradition any historical value whatsoever under any conditions whatsoever...primitive man African or Indian has neither a sense of history nor of historical prospective.[1]

Even to writers such as M. Herskovits who at least is willing to accept oral tradition as a possible source of history, oral tradition is considered "soft," leading only to probabilities. Those writers most sympathic to the acceptance of oral traditions qualify their acceptance by regarding each bit of information thus received as a "core of facts wrapped up in fictional elements."[2]

Closer study shows that oral tradition is indeed an accepted means of recording history which involves training by experts and specializations that would be understood even in our day by members of the American Medical Association. Such schools are noted by Mrs. E. Meyerowitz among the Akan of Ghana in which students were punished for being unable to repeat exactly the traditions they had been taught.[3] In other West African societies, a mistake in interpretation or an improvisation was thought to provoke the anger of the gods and the supernatural spirits. This as you can see is far more serious than anything our students can imagine in their pilgrimage for the perfect GPA. We find further that many of these oral historians have specialities and are responsible for certain types of traditions. For example, some are genealogists, while others are memorialists. Among the Akan, there are minstrels, the masters of ceremonies, the royal heralds, the court trumpters, the royal spokesmen, the priests, the guardians of the tomb, the women who carry the souls of the deceased queen mothers, the court officials and the governor of the capital.[4] All of these historians perserve certain parts of their society's history and pass them to their successors in office. In Mali, the 'griot' (a term made popular by Roots) is a living 'archive' who holds all his group's tradition. He may be in service either to a private individual or a prince of a family or of a specific occupational group. For example, hunters have their griots who know the names and habits of all animals in that locality and who perform certain pieces of music and special songs for each kind of game animal killed.

Farmers have their griots who persumably hold all the information necessary for cultivation of local crops, including astrological observations -- living almanacs. This degree of specialization should certainly be understood by a society that regularly patronizes members of the medical profession whose total practice is devoted to the treatment of only one organ.

Many modern scholars now accept oral tradition as a valid means of transmitting history and bemoan its loss. At a seminar on Ethno-History held in Daker, Senegal, in 1961 ethno-historians, gathered under the auspices of the African International Institute, declared:

> Traditional history of the kind of which we are accustomed in Europe and Asia is therefore inadequate and even the historian who is most attached to the methods which are appropriate to countries with written civilization is obligated when he specializes in African history, to abandon an orthodoxy which would prove unprofitable, to take little known paths where alone he is likely to find the material needed for the reconstruction of the past of peoples without writing. This is where he needs to use ethno-history. What is ethno-history? It is the reconstruction of the past by the use of all possible resources in the study of a given historical problem. Whereas the classical historian restricted himself almost exclusively to the use of written documents, of contemporary evidence and archaelogy, the ethno-historian for his part, will use, besides the traditional resources of history and archeology, those of oral tradition (starting from the myths about origins or contemporary evidence, by way of legend, semi-legendary traditions, and the more clearly defined traditions of the generations which immediately proceeded our own) and of ethnography in the widest sense: linguistics, anthropology, sociology, etc. These are two ways of looking at ethno-history, either as an ethnologist or as a historian...As far as the historian is concerned, he will regard ethno-history as an adjunct which is indispensable for the reconstruction of the past of a given country or people.[5]

The difficulties of this type of research may at times seem to be overpowering. Death of family members is obviously the most serious impediment to own family research. In my own research the deaths of my father and all his relatives except his two siblings left me with many unanswered questions about my grandparents. There simply weren't any people I could ask. In families such as my husband's, blessed with longevity, this is less of a

problem. I was able to interview two of his aunts, his father's sister who is in her late seventies and his mother's sister who is a lively lady in her late eighties.

Senility is another problem to be dealt with in this type of research. One often encounters an old person who on the surface is too irrational to contribute any information. From my experiences I advise researchers not to be put off by this seeming barrier. My maternal grandfather was nearly ninety when he died. His grasp of reality had started to slip long before his death. In answer to our questions he recited the same story without variation time after time. The story was from the period that was clearist in his mind, his youth. This story by repetition became fixed in my mind so that when I started to examine family history some fifteen years later I had one very clear story. As this story was unraveled it revealed many layers of meanings. This one story from a senile man turned out to be very significant in my research. Senile persons may have a very tenuous grasp of contemporary events, but the past is often very real to them. They may remember the very period you wish to know about. Elderly relatives must be considered priceless sources of family history.

There are some problems in interviewing elderly persons. You may lack sufficient background to frame the proper questions. This problem may be solved by the use of a "bridge"--a person who can span the age and information gap between the elderly person and the researcher. They have the background information that allows them to ask questions you might not be able to, because with their knowledge of events, they may be able to place the question in a context that will remind the subject of information that may be buried in their memories. In my research I had particular success in interviewing my husband's second oldest aunt, with her daughter serving as the bridge. Once my bridge understood the direction of my questions, she was able to elicit much more information than I could.

I will always be grateful to one of my students who encouraged me when I was fearful of approaching relatives I had never met. I was so uncertain that I might not have gone on one visit if this person had not reassured me. Based on these experiences I think that fears of this type are not justified at all. In all cases I have found, as my student told me, that family members are willing not only to share information, but also welcome one who asks about the family history.

The willingness to share information does not mean that the researcher might not find some areas that the family considers taboo. In my research I found a variety of attitudes toward certain subjects. Some people were concerned about maintaining a good image, but others considered the information so fearful that is was whispered. A question to be considered here is should the researcher become a secret keeper? My answer to this is supported by my experience and by several experts in the field. We all answer No to this question. In the first place, no matter how taboo the information, the secret is usually a poorly kept one. These old skeletons have often been the grist of the family gossip mills for years. In the second place, keeping secrets has the effect of closing communication. This is at counter purposes to this form of research. The researcher should rather be sensitive to the reasons behind the taboo and accepting of the past events. It has happened; that cannot be changed now.

Public documents such as census records, birth, death, and military records are a source of corroborating information. They are helpful when available, but cannot be depended on, because often natural disasters and military conflicts have destroyed some records. For example, the earliest records from Virginia and several other states were burned when the British destroyed Washington during the War of 1812. Floods destroyed some local records in Alabama that might have included information about members of my

husband's family. Public records are also not always accurate in their recording of information about black families. Black people were often not included and even if they appear, it is clear from the misspellings of names and variations in ages recorded from year to year that no systematic effort was made to record accurate and thorough information.

About two years ago now, Alan Paton came to our campus. I was very impressed to hear him read his own poetry from several bound volumns. I hasten to add that I have not reached that point yet myself, though I admit to being book conscious. I hesitate even to call what I write poetry. Verse is perhaps a better word. I found this form to be helpful because as I began to do the research, I remembered that the family members expressed themselves in such quaint language that I didn't want to lose it. There were family expressions that did not communicate to outsiders. Some events were spoken of in such picturesque terms that it would approach sacrilege to ignore them. The words were after all the family's life blood and I didn't want my work to take on the sterility of the astronauts, for example, who reported one of the truly great moments in human history with a "The Eagle has landed. Moonbase here." Some shouts of glee would have been more to the point it seems to me. Here are some of my verses.

This is an excerpt from the longest piece in my work. It describes my maternal great grandparents' exodus from their home in Prince Edward County, Virginia. It is one of the most important stories in my family's history.

'You know that nigger Jim Perrow?'
'Yea, that nigger Jim Perrow,
lives down by Rattlers Branch.'
"I just want to know
how he got them purty girls
on that little black woman?"

"Purty girls? I ain't never
seed 'em."
"Oh he keeps 'em close to home.

"Don't he hire 'em out,
spring or fall?"

"Don't never!
keeps 'em to home."
"They old enough for it?"
    Laughs and jeers.
"Mos' likely. It don't matter.
He don't never let them
offen his place."
"Must think they're
too good to work out
for other people."
"Where do he come off
thinking that."
"Somebody needs to teach
him a lesson, uppity bastard.
Purty girls you say?
How many?"

Horses, lots of horses coming,
and he's in the field.
Quick, get the children
    in the cabin.
    Bolt the door and
    lie on the floor.
    Wait there with
heart thumping terror,
while the horses come neerer.
    Round the cabin,
    round the cabin.

"We know you in there.
You tell that nigger Jim!
We're coming back tonight,
    to get him!
Got a little lesson for him!"

Long after the horses left,
and the noise of their
    going faded away,
they lay on the floor,
the woman and the
sobbing children.

Slowly she opened
 the door.
In the yard,
dead dogs, puppies
strangled.
Heads twisted off
chickens. Small
soft bodies.
Fur, feathers,
drying blood,
flies.

Bare brown feet
on the dirt road.
Running, carrying
    a warning.

"He fell down, right
down in the dirt.
Think his leg is broke.
Gonna get somebody else
and come tomorrow night."

Who can speak a woman's anguish
at leaving home.
Each move is a small
death.
What do you take?
What can you take
of your home when
you must leave it.
Not the house or the barn
or the clinging red earth.
Take the children's clothes,
the Bible, some quilts.
Everything won't go in
a spring wagon.

Riding saplings,
leaving at night,
Running for your life.

It's fifty miles
to Lynchburg.
Narrow roads,
thick woods.
Clothes still damp
from the line.[6]

This one is about my husband's aunt and uncle.

Mules won't work
if they're
Yoked unevenly.
Match a pair
and they'll work
all day.

Find the man
who suits you
best.
If its meant to
be
It'll last.

Sporting Life
all round and portly
shinny suits and
diamond rings.
Life is easy
if you
know how.
Find the easy
inside gig.[7]

Family studies and family therapy should not be regarded as just the latest flash in the professional pan of dazzling techniques designed to be a panacea for all the world's problems. Although relatively new as a treatment technique and an area of study, this discipline is nevertheless based on perhaps the most basic unit of our society--the family. Living in a family is an experience that is common to most people. Most of us receive our first human experiences as we are cared for in our most helpless state by members of this group. It is in families that we begin to learn the rules of our society. Family life is something we tend to take for granted, noticing only when it is absent. All of us have a stake in creating and maintaining health stable families because our experience as a species has taught us that the family is probably the best means we have of caring for our most dependent members, providing fulfilling emotional experiences and preserving our cultural traditions.

As our society changes, our families reflect the resultant stress. Family styles change as our life styles change. But with all the changes, with all the new forms, the family remains the basic unit of human society.

We must learn how to help this group care for its members because as Dr. Murray Bowen says, the family carries the seeds of healing as well as its illness.

When the family ceases to function, experts in family treatment may be called. Trained experts must understand the intricacies of family life as well as the problems that impair functioning. How and what training should these therapist receive? Family therapy is one way. I find Dr. Bowen's approach to teaching especially helpful because his methods combine training with the necessary self-examination that active therapists must do. This is done through own family research. In his years of experience he has found this method to be most valuable. Using family research as a training device

had been just another theory, he said, until he saw that the young medical students who were doing extended family work were doing the best clinical work and making more progress building healthy relationships in their own families than were other families who were being seen in treatment sessions once a week. To quote him further on this subject.

> The early family psychotherapy was predominantly observational, with questions to elicit more information about the observations. Over the years, "research" families have done better family psychotherapy than those for whom the primary goals was "therapy." This helped establish a kind of orientation which has made all families into "research families." It has been my experience that the more therapists learn about a family, the more the family learns about itself; and the more the family learns, the more the therapist learns, in a cycle which continues. In the observational process with the early families, some were able to restore family functioning without much "therapeutic intervention." The most successful families followed remarkable consistent courses in accomplishing this. Thereafter, it was possible to "intervene" and tell new families about successes and failures of former families and to save the new families endless hours and months of "trial and error" experimentation.[8]

Although I have been most heavily influenced in my work by Dr. Bowen's experiences, I would like to note at this point that at least one other leader in the field of family therapy also encourages the use of family research. Virginia Satir in Conjoint Family Therapy discusses the use of a "family map." The family map is a collection of information about the family's history. With her concern about open communication she gives specific guidelines for collecting this information that many students find especially helpful. She stresses the fact that the information sought is that which is known to the family, thus the stress they might experience in the initial contact is minimized and they experience success, perhaps the first such positive experience they have had in a long time.

I would now like to outline the steps in collecting family history using the genagram developed by Dr. Bowen. I have modified his basic plan somewhat by adding a few more symbols to the ones he usually uses. The

symbols are as follows: Squares for males, circles for females, solid lines indicating marriages, dotted lines indicating non-marriages, solid X for deaths followed by dates, dotted X for divorces followed by dates. The oldest sibling is shown on the left side of the family group.

The students are introduced to the symbols and their use is demonstrated. The students are then given an assignment to chart their own family. Their goal is to make this system understandable to an outsider. The rationale for this assignment is threefold. The first is the assumption that each person is sovereign in his own family system. The second is that once a person has done a chart, he or she can repeat the process with others; the process is transferable. The third is that practitioners in family therapy must have accomplished certain "homework." They must have examined their own systems so that they can listen to clients in a more professional way.

I have been using this technique with students for three years now. It's always a delightful experience to have students return to tell me how they are using the technique they learned in class. These are a few examples I've collected.

One student used the chart to present one of her cases to a staffing at her field agency. Several students have reported that they are continuing their family research, often engaging other family members. One student's continuing research had involved extensive travel to the site of the family's home two hundred years ago. One student who had not spoken to her parents for years renewed communication as a result of this assignment. Most recently a student reported that she had used the chart to answer her troubled teenager's questions. He was startled to see that she had left space for his wife on the chart. The chart reenforced the expectations that eventually he would fulfill certain roles. This same student had also used the genagram with a very troubled and rather disorganized family in her practice. The chart helped to

clarify communication and identify values that had been unclear to them for a long period. My own research and my experience with students has convinced me that the use of this technique is valuable for personal and professional reasons.

Now I'll tell you what my grandmother meant. My grandparents lived in Pocahontas, Virginia during all their lives together. My mother and her nine siblings were all born in Pocahontas. This was sort of a brawling town where the mine owners came for "rest and relaxation." This little town had eighteen bars and numerous houses of prostitution. Jingling keys, smoking on the street, wearing red petticoats and anklets were all things the prostitutes did by way of advertising. My grandmother had to make it clear to her six daughters what distinguished ladies from the "bad women."

Trees as we know are living things that begin small, that grow, that change with the seasons, as families do. Trees also stand on an extensive root system that supports and sustains them. Our family history does this for us as well.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Oral Traditions and History," by Robert H. Lowie in Emerging Themes of African History, T.O. Ranger, editor. (Dar es Salaam: East African Publishing House University College, 1968, p. 34.)

2. "Can We Enrich Current Historiography by Drawing on the Traditional and Islamic Past?" In Emerging Themes of African History, p. 35.

3. Ibid., p. 35.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 33.

6. Lethonee Angela Hendricks Jones, "Roots and Trees," (Ph.D. dissertation, Union Graduate School, 1977), pp. 44-47.

7. Ibid., p. 104.

8. Murray Bowen, "The Use of Family Theory in Clinical Practice," Comprehension Psychiatry, Volume 7, Number 5, (October 1, 1966), p. 353.

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